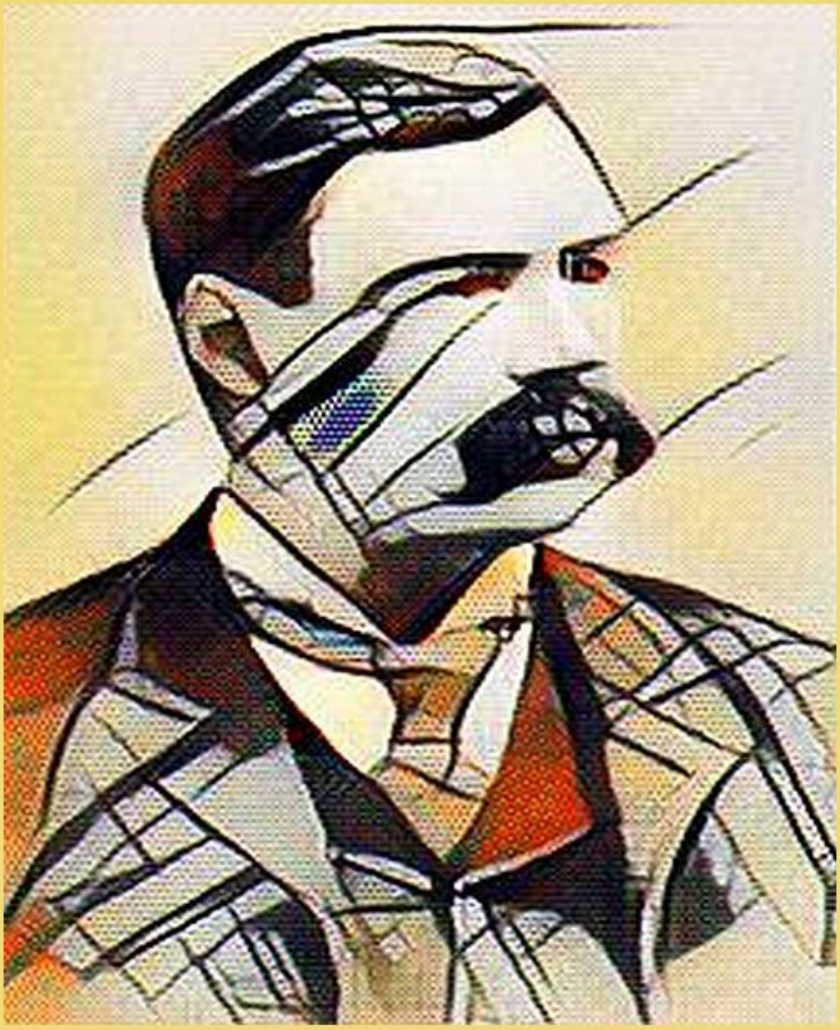
HAROLD FREDERIC



THE LAWTON GIRL

The Lawton Girl

HAROLD FREDERIC

The Lawton Girl, H. Frederic
Jazzybee Verlag Jürgen Beck
86450 Altenmünster, Loschberg 9
Deutschland

ISBN: 9783849649340

www.jazzybee-verlag.de
admin@jazzybee-verlag.de

CONTENTS:

CHAPTER I. -"AND YET YOU KNEW! "

"Thessaly! Ten minutes foh refreshments!" called out the brisk young colored porter, advancing up the aisle of the drawing-room car, whisk-broom in hand. " Change cahs foh Thanksgiving turkey and cranberry sauce," he added, upon humorous after-thought, smiling broadly as he spoke, and chuckling to himself.

This friendly remark was addressed in confidence to a group of three persons at the forward end of the car, who began preparations for the halt as the clanking of the wheels beneath them grew more measured, and the carriage trembled and lurched under the pressure of the brakes. But the cheery grin which went with it was exclusively directed to the two ladies who rose now from their arm-chairs, and who gently relaxed their features in amused response.

Whether the porter was moved only by the comeliness of these faces and their gracious softening, or whether he was aware that they were patrician countenances, so to speak, and belonged to Mrs. and Miss Minster, persons of vast wealth and importance and considerable stockholders in this very railroad, is not clear. But he made a great bustle over getting their parcels down from the racks overhead, and helping them to don their outer garments. He smoothed the rich fur of their sealskin cloaks with almost affectionate strokes of his coffee-colored palms, and made a pile of their belongings on the next seat with an exaggerated show of dexterity and zeal. This done, he turned for a cursory moment to the young man who constituted the third member of the group, peremptorily pulled up the collar of his overcoat to the top of his ears, and was back again with his arms full of the ladies' bundles as the train came to a stop.

"This way, ladies," he said, marching jauntily under his burden toward the door.

" I will bid you good-day, Mr. Boyce," said the elder of the women, speaking with somewhat formal politeness, but offering her hand.

" Good-day, sir," the younger said simply, with a little inclination of the head, but with no " Mr. Boyce," and no proffer of her gloved fingers.

The young man murmured " so delighted to have had the privilege " between low answering bows, and then stood watching the two fur-draped figures move to the door and disappear, with a certain blankness of expression on his face which seemed to say that he had hoped for a more cordial leave-taking. Then he smiled with reassurance, folded up and pocketed his thin car-cap, adjusted his glossy silk hat carefully, and proceeded to tug out his own valise. It was a matter of some difficulty to get the cumbrous bag down off the high icy steps to the ground. It was even more disagreeable to carry it along when he had got it down, and after a few paces he let it fall with a grunt of vexation, and looked about him for assistance. " How much better they do these things in Europe! " was what he thought as he looked.

All day long he had been journeying over a snowbound country — with white-capped houses, white-frozen streams, white -tufted firs, white mantled fields and roads and hillsides, forever dodging one another in the dissolving panorama before his window. The train drawn up for the moment behind him might have come in from the North Pole, so completely laden with snow was every flat surface — of roof and beam, of platform and window-frame — presented by the dark line of massive coaches. Yet it seemed to him that there was more snow, more bleak and cheerless evidence of winter, here in his native Thessaly, than he had seen anywhere else. It was characteristic, too, he felt, that nobody should appear to care how much

inconvenience this snow caused. There was but an indifferently shoveled path leading from where he stood, across the open expanse of side-tracks to the old and dingy depot beyond — cleared for the use of such favored passengers as might alight from the drawing-room section of the train. Those who had arrived in the ordinary cars at the rear were left to flounder through the smoke-begrimed drifts as best they could.

The foremost of these unconsidered travelers were coming up, red and angry with the exertion of carrying their own luggage, and plunging miserably along through the great ridges of discolored snow heaped between the tracks, when Mr. Boyce's impatient eye fell upon somebody he knew.

" Hello there, Lawton! " he shouted. " Come here and help me with this infernal bag, won't you! "

The man to whom he called had been gazing down the yard at the advancing wayfarers. He looked up now, hesitated for a moment, then came forward slowly, shuffling through the snow to the path. He was a middle-aged, thin, and round-shouldered man, weak and unkempt as to face and hair and beard, with shabby clothes and no overcoat. Although he wore mittens, he still from force of habit had his hands plunged half-way into his trousers pockets. Even where it would have been easy to step over the intermittent drifts and mounds at the sides of the tracks, he shiftlessly pushed his feet through them instead.

" Hello, Hod! " he said slowly, with a kind of melancholy hesitation, " is that you? "

Young Mr. Boyce ignored the foolish question, and indicated the valise with a nod of his head.

" I wish you'd get that thing down to the house, Ben. And take these checks for my trunks, too, will you, and see that they're brought down. Where is that expressman, anyway? Why isn't he here, on hand, attending to his business?"

"I don't know as I can. Hod," said the man without an overcoat, idly kicking into a heap of mingled cinders and snow with his wet, patched boots, and glancing uneasily down the yard. " I'm down here a-waitin' — for — that is to say, I've got somethin' else to do. Prob'ly you can get some other fellow outside the deepo."

Mr. Boyce's answer to this was to add a bright half-dollar to the brass baggage-checks he already held in his hand. The coin was on the top, and Ben Lawton could not help looking at it. The temptation was very great.

" I ought to stay here, you know," he faltered. " Fact is, honest Injun! I got to stay here! I'm lookin' for — somebody a-comin' in on this train."

" Well, you can look, can't you, and do this too? There's no hurry about the things. If they're home two hours hence it will be time enough."

" Yes, I know, it might be so as I could do it, later on," said Lawton, taking one of his hands from his pocket and stretching it tentatively toward the money. Then a second thought prompted him to waver, and he drew back the hand, muttering feebly: " Then, again, it might be so as I couldn't do it. You better get somebody else. And yet — I don't know — p'raps — "

Mr. Boyce settled the question by briskly reaching down for his bag. "All right! Please yourself," he said. " I've got no more time to waste with you. I'll do it myself."

Before he had fairly lifted the valise from the ground, the irresolute Lawton made up his mind. " Put her down again, Hod," he said. " I'll manage it somehow."

He took the half-dollar in his mittened hand, and tossed it gently up and down on the striped blue and white surface of yam. " It's the first money I've earned for over a week," he remarked, as if in self-defense.

Even as he spoke, a young woman in black who had been wandering about in the depot yard came running excitedly up to him. She gave a little inarticulate cry of recognition

as she drew near. He turned, saw her, and in a bewildered way opened his arms. She dropped her bundles and bandbox heedlessly into the snow, and threw herself upon his breast, hiding her face on his threadbare coat, and sobbing audibly.

Mr. Boyce had been entirely unprepared for this demonstration, and looked wonderingly upon the couple who stood in the path before him. After a moment or two of silent inspection he made as if to pass them, but they did not move. The girl still hid her face, although she had ceased to weep, and Lawton bent his head down over hers, with tears in his eyes and his gaze fixed vaguely on the snow beyond her, while he tenderly patted her shoulder with the hand that did not hold the half-dollar.

" All right, then, Ben,'' Mr. Boyce called out. " If you'll just let me pass, I'll walk on. Have the things there by five."

At the first sound of this voice, the girl raised her head. She turned now, her tear-stained face luminous with a deep, wrathful emotion, and looked at the speaker.

The young man did not for more than an instant try to meet this glance. His cheek flushed and his eyes sought the ground. He lifted his hand with a hurried, awkward gesture toward his hat, made a hasty plunge around them through the snow, and walked swiftly away past the gate into the depot.

The girl's intent gaze followed the retiring Mr. Boyce until he disappeared. Then it shifted suddenly and fell upon the face of Ben Lawton, from whose embrace she had now withdrawn.

The poor man made no effort whatsoever to brave its searching and reproachful inquiry. He balanced the half-dollar on his mitten's edge, watched the exercise with a piteously futile pretense of interest, and looked as if he was about to cry.

" What ' things ' were those he spoke of, father? " she asked, after a long pause.

The passengers who had temporarily left the train for the doubtful solace of the refreshment counter were beginning now to return. Some of them jostled past the couple who stood blocking the narrow path; and one of these, a stout and choleric man in a silk skull-cap and a fur-lined overcoat, brusquely kicked the big valise out of the way,overturning it in the snow. Lawton had not found the courage necessary for a complete explanation. He bent over now, set the bag on its bottom again, and made partial answer:

" This is one of 'em."

The heavy train, snow-capped and somber, began to draw out of the yard. The two Lawtons stood and silently watched it unfold its length — saw first the broad, plate-glass panes of the drawing-room and sleeping cars, with their luxurious shadows and glimpses of well-groomed heads and costly stuffs behind, glide slowly, sedately by; then, more rapidly, the closer-set windows of the yellow, common cars, through the steam on which visions of hats and faces dimly crowded; and last, the diminishing rear platform, with its solitary brakeman vehemently whirling the horizontal wheel of the brake — grow small, then indistinct, then vanish altogether. A sense of desertion, of having been left behind, seemed to brood over the old clapboarded depot like a cloud, darkening the ashen masses of snow round about and chilling the very air.

The daughter looked once more at her father.

" You are going to carry his things! " she said, with a stern, masterful inflection in her voice, and with flashing eyes.

" Hope-to-die, Jess, I tried as hard as I could to get out of it — made all sorts of excuses," Lawton pleaded, shrinking meantime from her gaze, and furtively but clumsily slipping the coin into his pocket. " But you know the kind of fellow Hod is — " he stammered here with confusion, and made

haste to add — " what I mean is — he — well, he just wouldn't take no for an answer."

She went, on coldly, as if she had not heard: " You have got his money — I saw it — there in your hand."

" Well, I tell you what, Jess," the father answered, with an accession of boldness, "half-dollars don't grow on every bush up this way. I ain't seen one afore in a fortnight. And to-morrow's Thanksgiving, you know — and then you've come home — and what was a fellow to do? "

The girl turned, as if it were fruitless to say more. Then the necessity for relief mastered her: she faced him again, and ground the words from between her set teeth with scornful sadness:

" You take his money — and yet you knew! "

CHAPTER II. - CONFRONTING THE ORDEAL.

Jessica Lawton stood on the sidewalk outside the depot, and waited for the return of her father, who had gone in search of the expressman.

The street up and down which she glanced was in a sense familiar to her, for she had been born and reared on a hillside road not far away, and until her eighteenth year had beheld no finer or more important place than this Thessaly — which once had seemed so big and grand, and now, despite the obvious march of " improvement," looked so dwarfed and countrified in its overlarge, misfitting coat of snow.

She found herself puzzled vaguely by the confusion of objects she remembered with things which appeared not at all to belong to the scene. There was the old Dearborn House, for example, on the same old corner, with its high piazza overhanging both streets, and its seedy brown clapboard sides that had needed a fresh painting as long as she could recollect — and had not got it yet. But beside it, where formerly had been a long, straggling line of decrepit sheds, was reared now a tall, narrow, flat-roofed brick building — the village fire-engine house; and through the half-open door, in which a man and a bull-dog stood surveying her, she could see the brassy brightness of a huge modem machine within. It seemed only yesterday that the manhood of Thessaly had rejoiced and perspired over the heavy, unwieldy wheeled pump which was dragged about with ropes and worked by means of long hand-brakes, with twelve men on a side, and a ducking from the hose for all shirkers. And here was a citified brick engine-house, and a " steamer " drawn by horses!

Everywhere, as she looked, this incongruous jumbling of the familiar and the novel forced itself upon the girl's attention. And neither the old nor the new bore on its face any welcome for her.

In a narrower and more compact street than this main thoroughfare of Thessaly, the people in view would have constituted almost a crowd. The stores all seemed to be doing a thriving business, particularly if those who lounged about looking in the windows might be counted upon presently to buy something. Both sides of the road were lined with rustic sleighs, drawn up wherever paths had been cut through the deep snow to the sidewalks; and farmers in big overcoats, comforters, and mittens were visible by scores, spreading buffalo-robes over their horses, or getting out armfuls of turkeys and tubs of butter from the straw in the bottoms of their sleds, or stamping with their heavy boots on the walks for warmth, as they discussed prices and the relative badness of the various snow-blocked roads in the vicinity. Farther down the street a load of hay had tipped over in the middle of the road, and the driver, an old man with a faded army-overcoat and long hair, was hurling loud imprecations at some boys who had snowballed him, and who now, from a safe distance, yelled back impolite rejoinders.

Among all who passed, Jessica caught sight of no accustomed face. In a way, indeed, they were all familiar enough: they were types in feature and voice and dress and manner of the people among whom her whole earlier life had been spent. But she knew none of them — and was at once glad of this, and very melancholy.

She had done a rash and daring thing in coming back to Dearborn County. It had seemed the right thing to do, and she had found the strength and resolution to do it. But there had been many moments of quaking trepidation during the long railroad journey from Tecumseh that day, and she was conscious now, as she looked about her, of a

well-nigh complete collapse of courage. The tears would come, and she had more than once furtively to lift her handkerchief to her face.

It was not a face with which one, at first glance, would readily associate tears. The features were regularly, almost firmly cut; and the eyes — large, fine eyes though they were — had commonly a wide-awake, steady, practical look, which expressed anything rather than weakness. The effect of the countenance, as a whole, suggested an energetic, self-contained young woman, who knew her way about, who was likely to be neither cheated nor flattered out of her rights, and who distinctly belonged to the managing division of the human race. This conception of her was aided by the erect, independent carriage of her shoulders, which made her seem taller than she really was, and by the clever simplicity of her black tailor-made jacket and dress, and her round, shapely, turban-like hat.

But if one looked closely into this face, here in the snowlight of the November afternoon, there would be found sundry lines and shadows of sensibility and of suffering which were at war with its general expression. And these, when one caught them, had an air of being new, and of not yet having had time to lay definite hold upon the face itself. They were nearer it now, perhaps, as the tears came, than they had often been before, yet even now both they and the moisture glistening on the long lashes, appeared foreign to the calm immobility of the countenance. Tears did not seem to belong there, nor smiles.

Yet a real smile did all at once move to softness the compressed lines of her lips, and bring color to her cheeks and a pleasant mellowing of glance into her eyes. She had been striving to occupy her alltoo-introspective mind by reading the signs with which the house-fronts were thickly covered; and here, on a doorway close beside her, was one at sight of which her whole face brightened. And it was a charming face now — k face to remember — with

intelligence and fine feeling and frank happiness in every lineament, yet with the same curious suggestion, too, of the smile, like the tears, being rare and unfamiliar.

The sign was a small sheet of tin, painted in yellow letters on a black ground:

REUBEN TRACY,

Attorney and Counsellor at Law, •

Second Floor.

" Oh, he is here, then; he has come back! " she said aloud. She repeated, with an air of enjoying the sound of the words: " He has come back."

She walked up to the sign, read it over and over again, and even touched it, in a meditative way, with the tip of her gloved finger. The smile came to her face once more as she murmured: " He will know — he will make it easier for me."

But even as she spoke the sad look spread over her face again. She walked back to the place where she had been standing, and looked resolutely away from the sign — at the tipped-over load of hay, at the engine-house, at the sleighs passing to and fro through eyes dimmed afresh with tears.

Thus she still stood when her father returned. The expressman who halted his bob-sleigh at the cutting in front of her, and who sat holding the reins while her father piled her valise and parcels on behind, looked her over with a half-awed, half-quizzical glance, and seemed a long time making up his mind to speak. Finally he said:

" How d'do? Want to ride here, on the seat, longside of me?"

There was an indefinable something in his tone, and in the grin that went with it, which she resented quickly.

" I had no idea of riding at all," she made answer.

Her father, who had seated himself on a trunk in the center of the sleigh, interposed. " Why, Jess, you remember Steve, don't you? " he asked, apologetically.

The expressman and the girl looked briefly at one another, and nodded in a perfunctory manner.

Lawton went on: " He offered himself to give us a lift as far as the house. He's goin' that way— ain't you, Steve?"

The impulse was strong in Jessica to resist — precisely why she might have found it difficult to explain — but apparently there was no choice remaining to her. " Very well, then," she said, " I will sit beside you, father."

She stepped into the sleigh at this, and took her seat on the other end of the big trunk. The expressman gave a slap of the lines and a cluck to the horse, which started briskly down the wide street, the bell at its collar giving forth a sustained, cheery tinkle as they sped through the snow.

"Well, what do you think — ain't this better'n walkin'? " remarked Lawton, after a time, knocking his heels in a satisfied way against the side of the trunk.

" I felt as if the walk would do me good," she answered, simply. Her face was impassivity itself, as she looked straight before her, over the expressman's shoulder.

Ben Lawton felt oppressed by the conviction that his daughter was annoyed. Perhaps it was because he had insisted on riding — instead of saying that he would walk too, when she had disclosed her preference. He ventured upon an explanation, stealing wistful glances at her meantime:

"You see, Jess, Dave Rant ell's got a turkey-shoot on to-day, down at his place, and I kind o' thought I'd try my luck with this here half-dollar, 'fore it gets dark. The days are shortenin' so, this season o' year, that I couldn't get there without Steve give me a lift. And if I should get a turkey— why, we'll have a regular Thanksgiving dinner; and with you come home, too! "

To this she did not trust herself to make answer, but kept her face rigidly set, and her eyes fixed as if engrossed in meditation. They had passed the great iron-works on the western outskirts of the village now, and the road leading

to the suburb of Burfield ran for a little through almost open country. The keener wind raised here in resistance to the rapid transit of the sleigh — no doubt it was this which brought the deep flush to her cheeks and the glistening moisture to her eyes.

They presently overtook two young men who were trudging along abreast, each in one of the tracks made by traffic, and who stepped aside to let the sleigh go by.

" Hello, Hod! " called out the expressman as he passed. " I've got your trunks. Come back for good?"

'' Hello, Steve! I don't quite know yet,"

was the reply which came back — the latter half of it too late for the expressman's ears.

Jessica had not seen the pedestrians until the sleigh was close upon them; then, in the moment's glimpse of them vouchsafed her, she had recognized young Mr. Boyce, and, in looking away from him with swift decision, had gazed full into the eyes of his companion. This other remembered her too, it was evident, even in that brief instant of passing, for a smile of greeting was in the glance he returned, and he lifted his hat as she swept by.

This was Reuben Tracy, then! Despite his beard, he seemed scarcely to have aged in face during these last five years; but he looked straighter and stronger, and his bearing had more vigor and firmness than she remembered of him in the days when she was an irregular pupil at the little old Burfield-road school-house, and he was the teacher. She was glad that he looked so hale and healthful. And had her tell-tale face, she wondered, revealed as she passed him all the deep pleasure she felt at seeing him again — at knowing he was near? She tried to recall whether she had smiled, and could not make sure. But he had smiled — of that there was not a doubt; and he had known her on the instant, and had taken off his hat, not merely jerked his finger toward it. Ah, what delight there was in these thoughts!

She turned to her father, and lifting her voice above the jingle of the bell, spoke with animation:

" Tell me about the second man we just, passed — Mr. Tracy. Has he been in Thessaly long, and is he doing a good business? " She added hastily, as if to forestall some possible misconception: " He used to be my school-teacher, you know."

" Guess he's gettin' on all right," replied Lawton: " I hain't heard nothin' to the contrary. He must a' been back from New York along about a year — maybe two." To her great annoyance he shouted out to the driver: " Steve, how long's Rube Tracy been back in Thessaly? You keep track o' things better'n I do."

The expressman replied over his shoulder: " Should say about a year come Christmas." Then, after a moment's pause, he transferred the reins to his other hand, twisted himself half around on his seat, and looked into Jessica's face with his earlier and offensive expression of mingled familiarity and diffidence. " He appeared to remember you: took off his hat," he said. There was an unmistakable leer on his lank countenance as he added:

"That other fellow was Hod Boyce, the General's son, you know — just come back from the old country."

"Yes, I know!" she made answer curtly, and turned away from him.

During what remained of the journey she preserved silence, keeping her gaze steadily fixed on the drifted fields beyond the fence in front of her and thinking about these two young men — at first with infinite bitterness and loathing of the one, and then, for a longer time, and with a soft, half-saddened pleasure, of the other.

It was passing strange that she should find herself here at all — here in this village which for years at a time she had sworn never to see again. But, when she thought of it, it seemed still more remarkable that at the very outset she should see, walking together, the two men whom memory

most distinctly associated with her old life here as a girl. She had supposed them both — her good and her evil genius — to be far away; in all her inchoate speculations about how she should meet various people, no idea of encountering either of these had risen in her mind. Yet here they were — and walking together!

Their conjunction disturbed and vaguely troubled her. She tried over and over again to reassure herself by saying that it was a mere accident; of course they had been acquainted with each other for years, and they had happened to meet, and what more natural than that they should walk on side by side? And yet it somehow seemed wrong.

Reuben Tracy was the best man she had ever known. Poor girl — so grievous had been her share of life's lessons that she really thought of him as the only good man she had ever known. In all the years of her girlhood — unhappy, wearied, and mutinous, with squalid misery at home, and no respite from it possible outside which, looked back upon at this distance, did not seem equally coarse and repellent — there had been but this solitary gleam of lights the friendship of Reuben Tracy. Striving now to recall the forms in which this friendship had been manifested, she was conscious that there was not much to remember. He had simply impressed her as a wise and unselfish friend — that was all. The example of kindness, gentleness, of patient industry which he had set before her in the rude, bare-walled little school-room, and which she felt now had made a deep and lasting impression on her, had been set for all the rest as well. If sometimes he had seemed to like her better than the other girls, his preference was of a silent, delicate, unexpressed sort — as if prompted solely by acquaintance with her greater need for sympathy. Without proffers of aid, almost without words, he had made her comprehend that, if evil fell upon her, the truest and most

loyal help and counsel in all the world could be had from him for the asking.

The evil had fallen, in one massed, cruel, stunning stroke, and she had staggered blindly away — away anywhere, anyhow, to any fate. Almost her instincts had persuaded her to go to him; but he was a young man, only a few years her senior — and she had gone away without seeing him. But she had carried into the melancholy, bitter exile a strange sense of gratitude, if so it may be called, to Reuben Tracy for the compassionate aid he would have extended, had he known; and she said to herself now, in her heart of hearts, that it was this good feeling which had remained like a leaven of hope in her nature, and had made it possible for her at last, by its mysterious and beneficent workings, to come out into the open air again and turn her face toward the sunlight.

And he had taken off his hat to her!

The very thought newly nerved her for the ordeal which she had proposed to herself — the task of bearing, here in the daily presence of those among whom she had been reared, the burden of a hopelessly discredited life.

CHAPTER III. - YOUNG MR. BOYCE'S MEDITATIONS.

The changes in Thessaly's external appearance did not particularly impress young Mr. Horace Boyce as he walked down the main street in the direction of his father's house. For one thing, he had been here for a fortnight only a few months before, upon his return from Europe, and had had pointed out to him all of novelty that his native village offered. And again, nearly four years of acquaintance with the chief capitals of the Old World had so dulled his vision, so to speak, that it was no longer alert to detect the presence of new engine houses and brick stores in the place of earlier and less imposing structures. To be accurate, he did not think much about Thessaly, one way or the other. So long as his walk led him along the busier part of the thoroughfare, his attention was fully occupied by encounters and the exchange of greetings with old school-fellows and neighbors, who all seemed glad to see him home again; and when he had passed the last store on the street, and had of necessity exchanged the sidewalk for one of the two deep-beaten tracks in the center of the drifted road, his thoughts were still upon a more engrossing subject than the growth and prosperity of any North American town.

They were pleasant thoughts, though, as any one might read in a glance at his smooth-shaven, handsome face, with its satisfied half smile and its bold, confident expression of eyes. He stopped once in his rapid walk and stood for a minute or two in silent contemplation, just before he reached the open stretch of country which lay like a wedge between the two halves of the village. The white surface in front of him was strewn here with dry boughs and twigs,

broken from the elms above by the weight of the recent snowfall. Beyond the fence some boys with comforters tied about their ears were skating on a pond in the fields. Mr. Boyce looked over these to the darkened middle-distance of the wintry picture, where rose the grimy bulk and tall smoke-belching chimneys of the Minster iron-works. He seemed to find exhilaration in his long, intent gaze at these solid evidences of activity and wealth, for he filled his lungs with a deep, contented draught of the nipping air when he finally turned and resumed his walk, swinging his shoulders and lightly tapping the crusted snowbanks at his side with his stick as he stepped briskly forward.

The Minster iron-works were undoubtedly worth thinking about, and all the more so because they were not new. During all the dozen or more years of their existence they had never once been out of blast. At seasons of extreme depression in the market, when even Pennsylvania was idle and the poor smelters of St. Louis and Chicago could scarcely remember when they had been last employed, these chimneys upon which he had just looked had never ceased for a day to hurl their black clouds into the face of the sky. They had been built by one of the cleverest and most daring of all the strong men whom that section had produced — the late Stephen Minster. It was he who had seen in the hills close about the choicest combination of ores to be found in the whole North; it was he who had brought in the capital to erect and operate the works, who had organized and controlled the enterprise by which a direct road to the coal-fields was opened, and who, in affording employment to thousands and good in' vestments to scores, had not failed to himself amass a colossal fortune. He had been dead now nearly three years, but the amount of his wealth, left in its entirety to his family, was still a matter of conjecture. Popular speculation upon this point had but a solitary clew with which to work. In a contest which arose a year before his death, over the

control of the Northern Union Telegraph Company, he had sent down proxies representing a clear six hundred thousand dollars' worth of shares. With this as a basis for calculation, curious people had arrived at a shrewd estimate of his total fortune as ranging somewhere between two and three millions of dollars.

Stephen Minster had died very suddenly, and had been sincerely mourned by a community which owed him nothing but good-will, and could remember no single lapse from honesty or kindliness in his whole unostentatious, useful career. It was true that the absence of public-spirited bequests in his will created for the moment a sense of disappointment; but the explanation quickly set afoot — that he had not foreseen an early death, and had postponed to declining years, which, alas! never came, the task of apportioning a moiety of his millions among deserving charities — was plausible enough to be received everywhere. By virtue of a testament executed two years before — immediately after the not altogether edifying death of his only son — all his vast property devolved upon Mrs. Minster, and her two daughters, Kate and Ethel. Every unmarried man in Thessaly — and perhaps, with a certain vague repining, here and there one of the married men too — remembered all these facts each time he passed the home of the Minsters on the Seminary road, and looked over the low wall of masonry at the close-trimmed lawn, the costly fountain, the graveled carriage-drive, and the great house standing back and aloof in stately seclusion among the trees and the rose-bushes.

Most of these facts were familiar as well to Mr. Horace Boyce. As he strode along, filliping the snow with his cane and humming to himself, he mentally embellished them with certain deductions drawn from information gathered during the journey by rail from New York. The Miss Kate Minster whom he had met was the central figure in his meditations, as indeed she was the important personage in

her family. The mother had impressed him as an amiable and somewhat limited woman, without much force of character; the younger daughter, Ethel, he remembered dimly, as a delicate and under-sized girl who was generally kept home from school by reason of ill-health, and it was evident from such remarks as the two ladies dropped that she was still something of an invalid. But it was dear that Miss Kate lacked neither moral nor bodily strength.

He was quite frank with himself in thinking that, apart from all questions of money, she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. It was an added charm that her beauty fitted so perfectly the idea of great wealth. She might have been the daughter of the millions themselves, so tall and self-contained and regal a creature was she, with the firm, dark face of her father reproduced in feminine grace and delicacy of outline; with a skin as of an Oriental queen, softly luxuriant in texture and in its melting of creamy and damask and deepening olive hues; and with large, richly brown, deep-fringed eyes which looked proudly and steadily on all the world, young men included. These fine orbs were her most obvious physical inheritance from her father. The expression " the Minster eyes," would convey as distinct an impression to the brain of the average Thessalian as if one had said " the Minster iron-works." The great founder of the millions, Stephen Minster, had had them, and they were the notable feature of even his impressive face. The son who was dead, Stephen junior, had also had them, as Horace now recalled to mind; but set in his weak head they had seemed to lose significance, and had been, in truth, very generally in his latter years dimmed and opacated by the effects of dissipation. The pale, sweet-faced little Ethel Minster, as he remembered her, had them as well, although with her they were almost hazel in color, and produced a timid, mournful effect. But to no other face in the entire family gallery did

they seem to so wholly belong of right as to the countenance of Miss Kate.

Young Mr. Boyce's thoughts wandered easily from the image of the heiress to the less tangible question of her disposition, and, more particularly, of her attitude toward him. There were obscurities here over which a less sanguine young man might have bitten his lips. He had ventured upon recalling himself to mother and daughter very soon after the train left New York, and they had not shown any shadow of annoyance when he took a vacant chair opposite them and began a conversation which lasted, such as it was, through all the long journey. But now that he came to think of it, his share in that conversation had been not only the proverbial lion's, but more nearly that of a whole zoological garden. Mrs. Minster had not affected any especial reserve; it was probable that she was by nature a listener rather than a talker, for she had asked him numerous questions about himself and about Europe. As for Miss Minster, he could scarcely recall anything she had said, what time she was looking at him instead of at her book. And he had not always been strictly comfortable under this look. There had been nothing unfriendly in it, it was true, nor could it occur to anybody to suspect in it a lack of comprehension or of interest. In fact, he said to himself, it was eloquent with both. The trouble was, as he uneasily attempted to define it, that she seemed to comprehend too much. Still, after all, he had said nothing to which she could take the faintest exception, and, if she was the intelligent woman he took her to be, there must have been a good deal in his talk to entertain her.

Even a less felicitous phrase-maker than Horace Boyce could have manufactured pleasant small-talk out of such experiences as his had been. The only son of a well-to-do and important man in Thessaly, he had had the further advantage of inheriting some twenty thousand dollars upon attaining his majority, and after finishing his course at

college had betaken himself to Europe to pursue more recondite studies there, both in and out of his chosen profession of the law. The fact that he had devoted most of his attention to the gleaning of knowledge lying beyond the technical pale of the law did not detract from the interesting quality of his observations. Besides listening to lectures at Heidelberg, he had listened to the orchestra swaying in unison under the baton of Strauss at Vienna, and to a good many other things in Pesth and Paris and Brussels and London, a large number of which could with propriety be described in polite conversation. And he flattered himself that he had discoursed upon these things rather cleverly, skirting delicate points with neatness, and bringing in effective little descriptions and humorous characterizations in quite a natural way.

Moreover, he said to himself, it had been his privilege to see America in perspective — to stand upon a distant eminence, as it were, and look the whole country over, by and large, at a glance. This had enabled him on his return to discover the whimsical aspect of a good many things which the stay-at-home natives took with all seriousness. He had indicated some of these to the two ladies with a light and amiably bantering touch, and with a consciousness that he was opening up novel ground to both his hearers.

Still — he wondered if Miss Minster had really liked it. Could it be possible that she belonged to that thin-skinned class of Americans who cannot brook any comment upon anything in or of their country that is not wholly eulogistic — who resent even the most harmless and obvious pleasantry pointed at a cis-Atlantic institution? He decided this promptly in the negative. He had met such people, but he could not associate them in his mind with the idea of great wealth. And Miss Minster was rich — incredibly rich. No doubt she was thinking, even while she listened to him, of the time when she too should go to Europe, and dazzle

its golden youth with her beauty and her millions. Now that he thought of it, he had seen much that same look before on the face of an American heiress, on her return from a London " five-o'clock tea," at which she had met an eligible marquis.

Could it be that her thoughts ran, instead, upon an eligible somebody nearer home? He devoted himself at this to canvassing the chances of her fancy being already fixed. It was of little importance that nothing in their conversation suggested this, because it was a subject to which they naturally would not have alluded. Yet he recalled that Mrs. Minster had spoken of their great seclusion more than once. He had gathered, moreover, that they knew very few people in New York City, and that they had little acquaintance with the section of its population which is colloquially known as " society." This looked mightily like a clear field.

Young Mr. Boyce stopped to thrust his cane under a twisted branch which lay on the snow, and toss it high over the fence, when he reached this stage of his meditations. His squared, erect shoulders took on a more buoyant swing than ever as he resumed his walk. A clear field, indeed!

And now as to the problem of proceeding to occupy that field. Where was there a gap in the wall? Millions were not to be approached and gained by simple and primitive methods, as one knocks apples off an overhanging bough with a fence-rail. Strategy and finesse of the first order were required. Without doubt there was an elaborate system of defenses reared around this girl of girls. Mrs. Minster's reference to seclusion might have itself been a warning that they lived inside a fort, and were as ready to train a gun on him as od anybody else. Battlements of this sort had been stormed time and time again, no doubt; human history was full of such instances. But Mr. Boyce's tastes were not for violent or desperate adventures. To go over a parapet with one's sword in one's teeth, in deadly

peril and tempestuous triumph, might suit his father the General: for his own part, it seemed more sagacious and indubitably safer to tunnel under the works, and emerge on the inside at the proper psychological moment to be welcomed as a friend and adviser.

Adviser! Who was their lawyer? The young man cast up in his mind the list of Thessaly's legal practitioners, as far as he could remember them. It seemed most probable that Benoni Clarke, the ex-district-attomey, would have the Minster business, if for no other reason than that he needed it less than the rest did. But Mr. Clarke was getting old, and was in feeble health as well. Perhaps he would be glad to have a young, active, and able partner, who had had the advantage of European study. Or it might be — who could tell? — that the young man with the European education could go in on his own account, and by sheer weight of cleverness, energy, and superior social address win over the Minster business. What unlimited opportunities such a post would afford him! Not only would he be the only young man in Thessaly who had been outside of his own country, the best talker, the best-informed man, the best-mannered man of the place — but he would be able to exhibit all these excellences from the favored vantage-ground of an intimate, confidential relation. The very thought was intoxicating.

Mr. Horace Boyce was so pre-occupied with these pleasing meditations that he overtook a man walking in the other track, and had nearly passed him, before something familiar in the figure arrested his attention. He turned, and recognized an old schoolmate whom he had not seen for years, and had not expected to find in Thessaly.

" Why — Reuben Tracy, as I live! " he exclaimed, cordially. " So you're back again, eh? On a visit to your folks? "

The other shook hands with him. " No," he made answer. " I've had an office here for nearly a year. You are looking

well. I'm glad to see you again. Have you come back for good? "

"Yes. That's all settled," replied Mr. Horace, without a moment's hesitation.